

Schools see no joy in near term

The Rhode Island Association of School Committees vows stepped-up lobbying efforts for more robust state support.

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A meeting of school officials from throughout the state yielded a strategy for dealing with financial woes in the coming fiscal year but offered no real interim solutions, attendees said.

"We're not going to accomplish anything toward meeting the needs and demands of the financial situation in Rhode Island or the local communities unless we find a way to do something collectively to make change," said Coventry School Committee Chairman Raymond E. Spear. "Change has got to take place."

Last week, the Rhode Island Association of School Committees hosted a "State Education Budget Crisis Meeting" to discuss the fiscal crunch districts are facing after being denied an increase in state aid for the year that began Sunday and feeling the ripple effect of

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legislation that caps local property tax increases.

The law passed last year requires that the budgets for all municipalities require no more than a 5.25 percent increase in the property tax levy. In ensuing years, the cap will drop by a quarter-point until it bottoms out at 4 percent.

Governor Carcieri had proposed a 3 percent across-the-board rise in state aid to local schools for fiscal 2008, but the General Assembly refused to accept any increase.

The pinch has left some districts contemplating lawsuits against their communities under the state law known as the Caruolo Act.

For the most part, the situation has left districts in one of three positions, said Timothy C. Duffy, executive director of the association.

"A number of communities are facing the tough decisions of laying off employees and curtailing programs," he said. "Those that have cut as far as they can cut are looking to file Caruolo. Other communities are looking down the road at what may be a very difficult budget year."

Duffy said the association is looking to mobilize committees to lobby during the next legislative session. Consolidating purchases, seeking reimbursement for unfunded mandates and, above all, establishing a predictable education-financing formula will be priorities for the association, he said.

"It's essential to have predictability each year," Duffy said. "Having an adequate, predictable funding formula is the single biggest thing."

But that doesn't help districts such as West Warwick, which is facing a \$1.8-million shortfall for the year that just began. The district has a series of cuts that it plans to formally unveil at a School Committee meeting next week, but, said committee Chairman Daniel T. Burns Jr., the board hasn't ruled out court action.

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There was no way for the communities to jointly file a Caruolo

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West Warwick School Committee

action, Duffy said, because the law looks at each district on a case-by-case basis. Burns estimated that more than a handful of communities would choose to go to court.

"It seems that most districts are going that route unless, with thunder and lightning, money falls out of the sky," Burns said.

Legal action could cause more of a storm than it's worth, said Spear, who served as Coventry's superintendent of schools for 16 years. He should know: he was heading the district in 1995 when it filed a Caruolo suit seeking an additional \$1 million to operate the schools.

The suit was generally successful, but "I'm left with the feeling that unless you really feel you're going to accomplish something major, it doesn't do any good to [file a lawsuit]," Spear said. "It only creates bad feelings and forces the community into doing something it didn't want to do. You're better off digging and doing things staffingwise—that I didn't believe should be done as superintendent, but that I see differently now."

Coventry is facing a nearly \$550,000 deficit in its proposed budget for 2008, though Spear said the final number is yet to come. (Because the Town Council revisited its 2008 budget proposal after adopting it, the Financial Town Meeting has yet to be held. The School Department is operating under last year's authorized budget of \$59.9 million.)

Spear said he expects the district to make the necessary cuts to operate without seeking legal action, while it waits to see if things get better.

"There are all kinds of problems that need to be resolved," he said. "We need something to get us more aggressive collectively to see if we can't get something done. It's not going to help in 2007-2008, but it may help in 2008-2009."

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